

60p

THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

Spotlight on Borley
Mysterious moving stones
Cergy-Pontoise confusion
Alternative medicine
Figures from beyond

93



Aus & NZ \$1.75 SA R1.75 IR 85p US \$1.50

THE Unexplained

MYSTERIES OF MIND SPACE & TIME

Published weekly by Orbis Publishing Limited
Orbis House, 20/22 Bedfordbury, London WC2N 4BT

Volume 8 Issue 93

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Picture acknowledgements

Cover: Photri; John Beckett (inset); 1841: Jeanie Morison; 1842: Mary Evans Picture Library; 1843: Mary Evans Picture Library (b); 1844-1845: Toby Hogarth; 1846: F. Goodman (t); Mary Evans Picture Library (b); 1847: Mary Evans Picture Library/Harry Price Collection; 1848: F. Goodman (t); Psychic News (c); 1849: Mary Evans/SPR (t); Mary Evans Picture Library (t, c and b); 1850-1851: Michael Holford; 1851: Mary Evans Picture Library; 1852: Ronald Sheridan (t and tr); A-Z Collection (bc); 1852-1853: Mary Evans Picture Library; 1853: Mary Evans Picture Library; 1854: Guy Jouhaud; 1854-1855: Gamma/Francis Apesteguy; 1855: illustration by Murray Aikman; 1856: Control/T. Verdal; 1856-1857: G. E. O. S.; 1857: illustration by Murray Aikman; 1858-1859: John Beckett; 1860: Robert Runge; back cover: Sonia Halliday

In next week's issue

Genuine UFO sightings over London are rare – most are all too easily explained as misidentifications of aeroplane lights. But in **UFO Casebook** we describe one of the exceptions: an impressive sighting over south-west London. In **Alternative healing** we examine the practice of homoeopathy – the principle that diseases can be healed by administering minute quantities of drugs that produce its symptoms. Our article on **The Sun** asks the controversial question, 'Are we slaves of the Sun?' – is our physical health controlled by what happens on the Sun's surface? The Bible is full of seemingly paranormal events – miracles, divinations, prophecy. In **Bible mysteries** we explore and analyse them. And in **Holy blood, Holy Grail** we continue our unravelling of the web of secrets surrounding the story of Christ's crucifixion.

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Subscription Rates

For six months (26 issues) £17.60, for one year (52 issues) £35.20. Send your order and remittance to The Unexplained Subscriptions, Punch Subscription Services, Watling Street, Bletchley, Milton Keynes, Bucks MK2 2BW, being sure to state the number of the first issue required.

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Was Borley Rectory really 'the most haunted house in England' – or was its fame built on a great publicity stunt by ghost hunter Harry Price? Indeed, was Price a headline-seeking fraud? FRANK SMYTH investigates

BORLEY PARISH CHURCH stands on a hillside overlooking the valley of the river Stour, which marks the boundary between the counties of Essex and Suffolk in England. Borley can hardly even be called a village: the hundred or so inhabitants of this Essex parish, mainly agricultural workers and weekend cottagers, do their shopping and socialising in Long Melford or Sudbury, the two nearest small towns on the Suffolk side; for more important business they travel from Borley Green to Bury St Edmunds, about 25 miles (40 kilometres) away.

But in 1940 the publication of a book entitled *The most haunted house in England* made the community world famous, and in 1946 a further volume, *The end of Borley Rectory*, set the seal on its fame. Both were written by the flamboyant ghost hunter Harry Price, who made psychical research headlines in his day. The two books claimed that Borley Rectory, a gloomy Victorian house that had burned down in 1939, was the centre of remarkably varied paranormal

Borley Church, whose vicars lived in the reputedly haunted Borley Rectory not far away. Harry Price, ghost hunter, psychical researcher and author, put the parish of Borley 'on the map' when he wrote a book about the rectory hauntings in 1940

phenomena. These included a phantom coach, a headless monk, a ghostly nun who may or may not have been the monk's lover, the spirit of a former vicar, eerie lights, water that turned into ink, mysterious bells, and a multifarious cascade of things that went bump in the night.

'One of the events of the year 1940' was how the first book was described by *Time and Tide* in its glowing review, while the *Church Times* said that it would 'remain among the most remarkable contributions ever made to the study of the paranormal'. Price, who professed to have devoted 10 years to his study of Borley's ghosts, continued to lecture, broadcast and write on the subject until his death on 29 March 1948. An obituary in *The Times* the following day summed him up as a psychical researcher with 'a singularly honest and clear mind on a subject that by its very nature lends itself to all manner of trickery and chicanery'.

Not everyone who knew or worked with Price agreed with this glowing testimonial, however. Some months after his death, and with the danger of libel safely out of the way, an article by Charles Sutton of the *Daily Mail* appeared in the *Inky way annual*, a World's Press News publication. Writing of a visit he had paid to Borley in 1929, in the

Borley: a haunting tale



Borley Rectory

middle of Price's first investigation with another colleague, Sutton said that he had discovered what might be fraud on Price's part. After a large pebble had hit Sutton on the head, he found that Price had 'bricks and pebbles' in his pockets.

On a more careful investigation, two members of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) – Lord Charles Hope and Major the Hon. Henry Douglas-Home – had had serious doubts about 'phenomena' they had witnessed at the rectory in the late 1920s. Both of them filed testimony with the SPR stating that they had grave suspicions. Douglas-Home went as far as to accuse Price of having a 'complete disregard for the truth in this matter'. He told how, on one occasion, he was accompanying Price around the rectory in the darkness when they heard a rustling that reminded him of cellophane being crumpled. Later, he sneaked a look into Price's suitcase and found a roll of cellophane with a torn edge.

It was as a result of this testimony that the Council of the SPR invited three of their members, Dr Eric J. Dingwall, Mrs K. M. Goldney and Mr Trevor H. Hall, to undertake a new survey of the evidence. The three were given access to Price's private papers and correspondence by his literary executor, Dr Paul Tabori. They also had access to documents in the Harry Price Collection, which Price had placed on permanent loan to the University of London in 1938 and bequeathed to that institution on his death. This survey took five years to prepare and was published in 1956 under the title *The haunting of Borley rectory*.

The reviews of this book were as enthusiastic as those of Price's two volumes in the 1940s, although for diametrically different reasons. The *Sunday Times* said that the Borley legend had been demolished 'with clinical thoroughness and aseptic objectivity', while Professor A.G.N. Flew in the *Spectator* commented that the 'shattering



Price in action: on the radio direct from a haunted house in Meopham, Kent, in 1936 (above) and on a much-publicised trip to Germany with C.E.M. Joad to recreate a magical scene on the Brocken in the Harz mountains in 1932 (below)



and fascinating document' had proved that Borley had been 'a house of cards built by the late Harry Price out of little more than a pack of lies'.

There, perhaps, the matter should have rested, but due to a combination of factors it did not. The principal reason may have been that Borley had made sensational copy for the world's popular newspapers for over a quarter of a century, and even the most objective of reporters dislikes seeing a good source dry up. Newspapers and television programmes glossed over the painstaking evidence of Dingwall, Goldney and Hall, one referring to them as 'the scoffers who accused Harry Price, the greatest of ghost seekers, of rigging the whole legend'. And once more, the events described by Price were said to be 'puzzling, frightening, and inexplicable'. Peter Underwood, the president of the Ghost Club, and the late Dr Tabori returned to Price's defence in 1973 with a book entitled *The ghosts of Borley: annals of the haunted rectory*. They dedicated it to 'the memory of Harry Price, the man who put Borley on the map'.

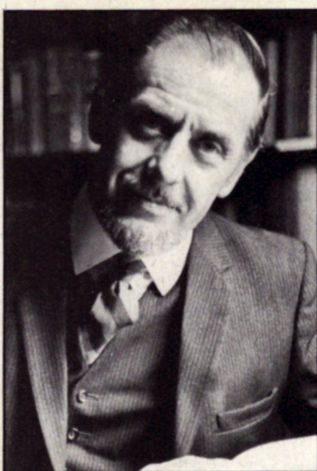
In his book *The occult*, published in 1971, Colin Wilson made a fair and scrupulously unbiased summing up of the evidence for and against the Borley case. His conclusion was that 'a hundred other similar cases could be

extracted [from SPR records]. . . . Unless someone can produce a book proving that Price was a pathological liar with a craving for publicity, it is necessary to suspend judgement.'

And, indeed, in 1978 SPR investigator Trevor H. Hall set out to prove Price 'a pathological liar with a craving for publicity'. The title of his book, *Search for Harry Price*, was a pun based on Price's own autobiography *Search for truth* (1942).

Had it been less carefully documented, Hall's book could have been fairly described as a piece of muckraking. He revealed, for instance, that Price's father was a London grocer who had seduced and married Price's mother when she was 14 and he was over 40. Price himself, in his autobiography, had claimed to be the son of a wealthy paper manufacturer who came of 'an old Shropshire family'.

Price stated that his childhood had been spent between the London stockbroker suburb of Brockley and the family's country home in an unnamed part of Shropshire. He said that he usually 'broke his journey' there on the way to and from school, implying that he was educated at a boarding school in the country. Hall's researches clearly showed the family home to have been in New Cross, not far from, but far less salubrious than, Brockley. Price, said Hall, attended a local secondary school, Haberdasher's Aske's Hatcham Boys' School, a perfectly respectable lower middle class establishment, but not a public boarding school. The only family connection



Above: Peter Underwood, the president of the Ghost Club, who came down on the side of Price in the controversy over the latter's integrity

Below: the ruins of Borley Rectory four years after it was completely destroyed by a mysterious fire. This did not end the speculation over its haunting

with Shropshire was that Price's grandfather had once been landlord of the Bull's Head at Rodington.

According to Price, he had held a directorship in his father's paper manufacturing company after leaving school, spending the 10 years between the end of his schooldays and his marriage in 1908 pleasantly as an amateur coin collector and archaeologist. In fact, according to Hall, Price earned his living in New Cross in a variety of odd ways. He took photographs of local shopfronts for advertising purposes; hired out his portable gramophone and records for dances, parties and other functions; performed conjuring tricks at concerts – a skill that he was later accused of using during his Borley investigation – and peddled glue, paste and a cure for footrot in sheep from door to door in the Kent countryside. Price had an indubitable flair for writing, as the impressive sales of his books – some 17 in all – testify.

In 1902 Price wrote an article for his old school magazine, *The Askean*, about the excavation of a Roman villa in Greenwich Park, quoting as his source a book written by the director of the project. By 1942, in *Search for truth*, he was claiming that he had actually helped to excavate the site. He also contributed a series of articles to the *Kentish Mercury* on coins and tokens of the county, following this up with another series for Shropshire's *Wellington Journal* on 'Shropshire tokens and mints'.

Hall asked the Reverend Charles Ellison, Archdeacon of Leeds and a leading authority





Left: Haberdasher's Aske's Hatcham Boys School, where Price had his education, as it looks today. According to Price's detractor, Trevor H. Hall, Price hinted in his autobiography that he had attended a public school

Below: the Harry Price Library in the Senate House at London University. Price bequeathed to the university his outstanding collection of thousands of books on magic and the occult – which Hall characterises as Price's 'most useful achievement'. Price also tried to get the university to establish a psychical research department, but failed. Some say that the institution was scared off by his flamboyant approach to scientific investigation

on numismatics, to examine Price's writings on coins. The archdeacon found them to be straight plagiarisms from two obscure works on the subject. 'It is unsafe to rely on any statement made by Harry Price which lacks independent confirmation,' he concluded.

Hall reported that Price's financial independence came from his marriage to Constance Knight, who inherited a comfortable fortune from her father. It was her means, and not family wealth as claimed, that gave him the leisure to put his days of door-to-door peddling behind him and embark on his career as psychical researcher and book collector. The assembling of a library of occult and magical books running into several thousand volumes was, said Hall, 'Price's most useful achievement during his life'.

Even the library seemed to offer opportunities for chicanery, however. In the collection Hall found several valuable books clearly marked with the imprint of the SPR. Price had catalogued them as his own, even attaching his own book plate.

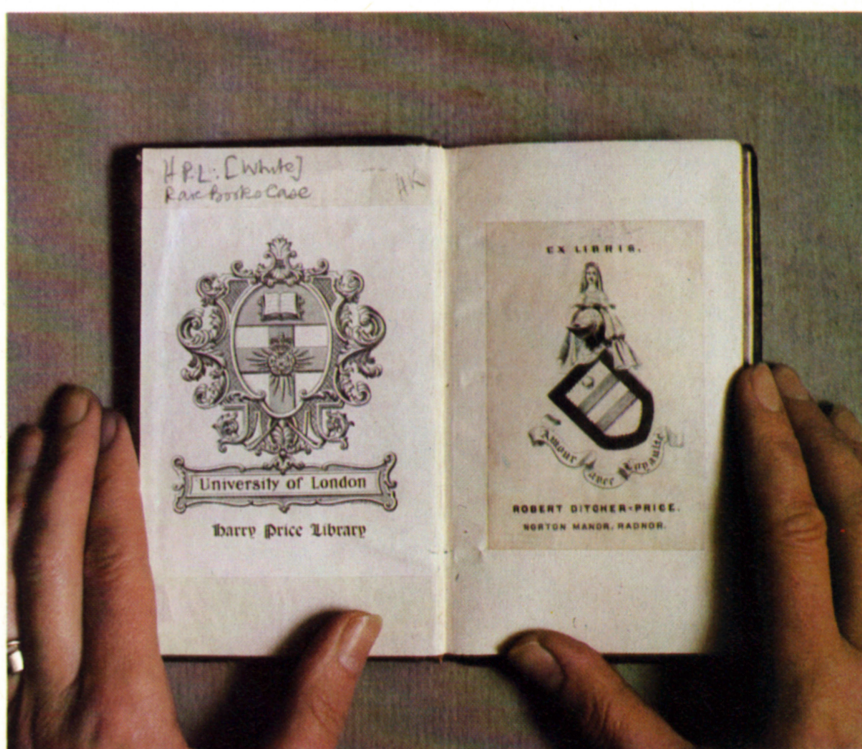
Price's book plates were a source of interest and amusement for Hall, as well as another example of Price's covertness. Price used two crested plates. One featured a lion rampant and proved on investigation to be the family crest of Sir Charles Rugge-Price of Richmond, with whom Harry Price had no connection. The other, bearing a crest and coat of arms, carried the name 'Robert Ditcher-Price' and the address 'Norton Manor, Radnor'. Hall's investigations revealed that the crest and arms were those of Parr of Parr, Lancashire, and that Norton Manor belonged to Sir Robert Green-Price, Baronet, whose family had lived there since the 17th century. A letter from Lady Jean

Green-Price unequivocally stated that she had never heard of Robert Ditcher-Price and that she was 'quite certain that he never resided at Norton Manor'.

In his first book on Borley Rectory in 1940 Price used a version of the 'nun's tale' supplied by the Glanville family – father Sydney, son Roger and daughter Helen. While holding a seance with a planchette at their home, Helen Glanville elicited the information that a nun had indeed been murdered at Borley and that she was a Frenchwoman called Marie Lairre. On the subject of this and subsequent seances he held, Sydney Glanville was almost apologetic to SPR researchers Dingwall, Goldney and Hall, admitting that suggestion had played a part: all three Glanvilles had studied the history of the Borley hauntings.

After the story of the French nun's ghost appeared in *The most haunted house in England*, Price received an elaborate theory from Dr W. J. Phythian-Adams, Canon of Carlisle, to the effect that Marie Lairre had been induced to leave her convent and marry one of the local landowners. She had been strangled by her husband and buried in a





well on the site of the rectory. The canon suggested that the ghost of the former nun stole a French dictionary from the residents of Borley Rectory in the 19th century so that she could brush up on her English in order to communicate with them.

Despite some other preposterous twists in the canon's theory, Price seized on it eagerly. Hall accuses him of manufacturing and planting evidence to back it up. Part of this evidence was two French medals that Price claimed had appeared as 'apports' during his first visit to the rectory in 1929. One was a Roman Catholic confirmation medal and the other a badge or pass issued to members of the National Assembly after the revolution. Yet previously, Price had said that there was one apported medal and that it was a 'Loyola' medal. Price's faithful secretary stated that the Loyola medal was the only one she had ever seen.

Puzzling finds

Further to this case, Hall recounts how Price had excavated what he called a well in the ruined cellars of Borley Rectory in 1943, discovering a human jawbone in the soft earth. The excavation was made by lamp-light. The well turned out to be a modern concrete basin. And during the demolition of the ruins, a switch and lengths of wire were found in the cellar, though the house had never been supplied with electricity. Had Price used this equipment with a portable battery to light the cellars as he secretly buried the jawbone for later discovery?

And so Trevor Hall's book goes on, each damning fact backed by documentary evidence, much of which is from Price's own unpublished notes and correspondence.

Three of Harry Price's book plates. The one on the far right, bearing the name of 'Robert Ditcher-Price' and the address 'Norton Manor, Radnor', was investigated by Hall. He says that the titled family residing at Norton Hall, the Green-Prices, had never heard of a Robert Ditcher-Price

Price's accounts of psychical research projects are shown time and again to be inaccurate, or almost entirely invented, or presented over the years in different versions with contradictory details. *Search for Harry Price* certainly fulfills Colin Wilson's criterion: it shows Price as a confirmed liar and publicity seeker. The absurd experiment in which Price and Professor C. E. M. Joad conducted a magical ceremony in the Harz mountains in Germany for a regiment of press photographers more than proves the latter. But even more, the revelations indicate that he was a fraud.

But does the tarnishing of Price's character necessarily mean that the haunting of Borley Rectory was fraudulent? From the year the rectory was built in 1863 until 1929, when Price first became interested in it, stories circulating in the area had seemed to suggest paranormal happenings. Furthermore, from 1930 to 1937 Price visited Borley only once, and yet at least 2000 allegedly paranormal incidents were recorded during that time. In a year straddling 1937 and 1938, when Price rented the empty rectory and recruited a team of independent witnesses through an advertisement in *The Times* to live there with him, several incidents were reported in Price's absence. Finally, between Price's residency and 27 February 1939, when the rectory was 'mysteriously' destroyed by fire at midnight, odd events occurred.

So, regardless of Price's role, was Borley Rectory in fact the 'most haunted house in England'?

A phantom nun, flying keys, raps and mystery lights: phenomena or fraud? See page 1894



clear, however, that she did not wish to part with it.

Sometimes Yolande's spirit form would gradually dissolve into a mist, on occasions in front of 20 witnesses, and only the scarf would be left lying on the ground. 'At last she has forgotten it,' a sitter would remark. But then the scarf, too, would slowly vanish in the same manner.

Madame d'Esperance was one of the earliest English materialisation mediums and she readily co-operated with investigators who wanted to prove the spirits were not produced by fraud – even to the extent of allowing photographs to be taken. But one particular seance experience suggests that materialisation is not a straightforward phenomenon.

At a seance in Newcastle in 1880 one of the sitters became suspicious because another of Madame d'Esperance's materialisations – known as 'the French lady' – looked uncannily like the medium. He made a grab for the spirit, which promptly vanished. But the medium suffered a lung haemorrhage and was ill for a long time after the seance. On two other occasions similar incidents occurred, but Madame d'Esperance was never found to be producing the strange manifestations fraudulently.

Spiritualists say that touching a materialisation (unless permission has been granted by the 'spirits') or putting a light on during a seance can do untold damage to mediums because it causes the 'ectoplasm' – from which the spirit forms are made – to return to

This too, too solid flesh

Can the dead materialise in their physical bodies in the presence of unusually gifted mediums? ROY STEMMAN cites some of the rare cases of materialisation where fraud could apparently be ruled out

YOLANDE WAS A 15-year-old Arab girl. She was also, allegedly, a spirit, which meant she could appear and disappear at will, in the presence of a famous English materialisation medium, Madame Elizabeth d'Esperance. Visitors to Madame d'Esperance's seances often claimed to have seen both the materialisation and the medium simultaneously. The way in which Yolande departed from the seance left the witnesses in no doubt that she was a genuine paranormal manifestation, even though she appeared to be a normal, living person while she was materialised.

Being 'only human', Yolande took a liking to a certain brilliantly coloured scarf that a sitter was wearing, and 'borrowed' it. When she dematerialised the scarf disappeared with her, but she was seen to be wearing it at her next seance appearance. She made it

Above: Yolande, alleged spirit guide of Madame d'Esperance

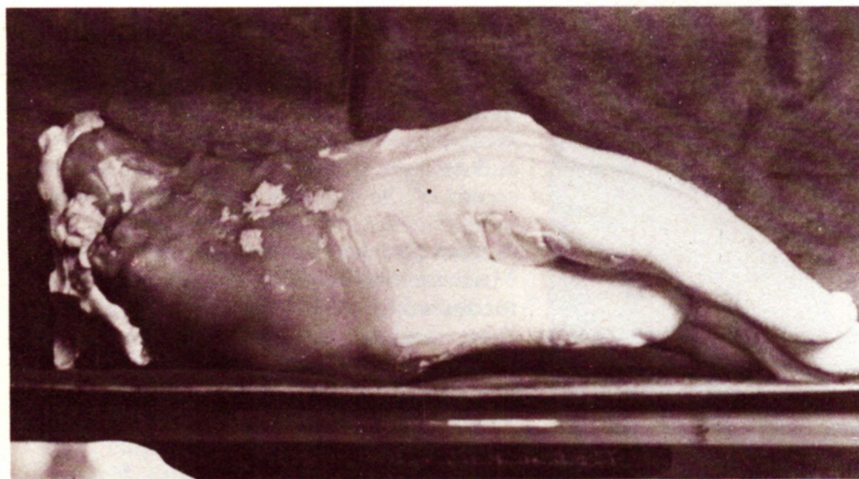
Right: illustration by Tissot, depicting the two materialised spirits he encountered at a seance given by London medium William Eglinton (top right) in the 1880s. It seems logical that a genuine materialised spirit would still be wearing a shroud; but the voluminous clothing would also make an ideal disguise for fake 'spirits'



the medium's body at too great a speed. Nevertheless, there have been cases where materialisations are said to have been produced in daylight.

It was London medium William Eglinton who was responsible for convincing many sceptics. After attending one of his seances, the famous conjurer Harry Kellar declared: 'I must own that I came away utterly unable to explain, by any natural means, the phenomena that I witnessed.' At one point during this seance both Kellar and Eglinton were levitated.

One of the alleged spirits who regularly appeared at Eglinton's seances was Abd-ullah who had only one arm and was adorned with jewels, rings, crosses and clusters of rubies that were apparently worth a fortune. But another materialisation, a bearded man in a long robe, allowed one of the sitters to cut a piece of material from his clothes and a part of his beard. These were later said to match holes in a piece of muslin and a false beard



found in a trunk belonging to Eglinton.

Despite this particular accusation of fraud – which was made by Archdeacon Thomas Colley – Eglinton continued to give seances and impressed many eminent people. He developed slate-writing powers: the spirits were said to write answers to questions on small black slates. William Gladstone visited him on 29 October 1884, and wrote down confidential questions in Spanish, Greek and French. The answers were given in those languages. The prime minister was so impressed that he became a member of the Society for Psychical Research.

The man who claimed to have exposed Eglinton was, ironically, no sceptic: Archdeacon Colley of Natal and Rector of Stockton, England, was a staunch supporter of another materialisation medium, an English clergyman-turned-medium, the Reverend Francis Ward Monck. Monck was not only accused of being a fraud but was sentenced to three months' imprisonment on the evidence of 'props' found in his room after a seance in Huddersfield in November 1876. Archdeacon Colley was in South

Africa at the time but he was adamant that Monck was genuine.

The problem with materialisations is that they leave no tangible evidence of their reality. Investigator William Oxley, however, came up with an ingenious method of 'recording' the presence of Monck's materialised spirits (one that has been used successfully with other mediums). At a seance in Manchester in 1876 Oxley was able to make excellent paraffin moulds of the hands and feet of materialisations.

Waxing and waning

To make a paraffin mould, warm wax is poured onto the surface of a bowl of water and the materialisation is asked to plunge its hand into it. The spirit form then immerses its hand in a bowl of cold water, causing the wax to harden. The form then dematerialises leaving a glove-like wax cast – often with a very narrow wrist opening from which it would have been impossible for a human hand to withdraw without splitting the mould.

A Polish intellectual, Franek Kluski, was a very powerful physical medium who produced wax impressions in this way. He was never a professional medium, but he offered his services to Dr Gustave Geley and the Institut Métapsychique, Paris, in 1920. This eminent psychical researcher, and other investigators, testified that in Kluski's presence phantom limbs materialised, luminous forms glided around the seance room and brilliant lights suddenly appeared. Under strict controls they were even able to produce photographs of a phantom. And both Dr



Above left: cast of a wax 'spirit glove' made during one of Franek Kluski's seances in Warsaw in the 1920s. The materialised spirit would dip its hand in a bath of liquid wax, then into cold water to let the mould harden. The spirit would then dematerialise, leaving a hard wax cast with a tiny opening at the wrist. Harry Houdini, however, frequently demonstrated the relative ease with which the setting 'glove' could be peeled off before being hardened in cold water (left)



Geley and Dr Charles Richet, who was a professor of physiology in Paris, obtained excellent moulds of materialised hands and limbs with Kluski.

The full-form materialisations that appeared at Kluski's seances (see box) often arrived suddenly, though at other times they were seen to emerge from a faintly luminous cloud above the medium's head.

The materialisations produced by a Cardiff boot and shoe repairer, George Spriggs, seem almost too good to be true, but there is ample testimony from people who witnessed the phenomenon and who were all aware of the precautions that need to be taken against fraud.

Spriggs's paranormal powers developed in a Welsh Spiritualist circle in the late 1870s, beginning with clairvoyance and automatic writing – and culminating in full-form phantoms. He emigrated to Australia in November 1880, taking his psychic powers with him. A prominent Australian named



Donovan, a former member of the Legislative Assembly of Victoria, attended Spriggs's seances for 18 months and wrote a book about his experiences, *The evidences of Spiritualism*.

An extraordinary incident occurred at one of the Australian seances when a man materialised and said he wanted to write a letter to a Sydney woman who had visited the seances a couple of times. He was given a pen and paper and wrote a three-page letter, which he placed in an envelope and addressed to the woman. But no one had a stamp. The spirit borrowed sixpence from a sitter and left the seance room to buy one from the shop next door. Word reached the shopkeeper that a phantom was on its way to buy a stamp and he was so flustered that he forgot to give the dead man his change. The spirit realised the error when he got back to the seance room and promptly returned to the shop for the money. The letter was posted and a reply duly received; this was kept until the spirit materialised at another seance, opened it, and read the contents aloud.

Spriggs's ability to produce materialisations faded after six years but he developed the ability to diagnose illness psychically. He returned to Britain in 1900 and between 1903 and 1905 he gave free medical advice in the rooms of the London Spiritualist Alliance.

A demand for healing

Medicine also played an important role in the mediumship of English psychic Isa Northage, and the materialisation seances she gave are perhaps the most astonishing ever recorded. She was a popular medium in the 1940s, visiting churches to demonstrate her psychic powers, which included apport mediumship, direct voice and materialisation. But it was the healing work of her spirit doctor, Dr Reynolds, that was in particular demand and eventually a church was built specifically for this work in the grounds of Newstead Abbey, Northumberland. In time – as the medium's powers grew stronger – Dr Reynolds was able to materialise and carry

Top: a phantom begins to materialise in the gloom of one of Kluski's seances. Spiritualists believe that ectoplasm – the material from which materialisations are formed – is photosensitive; which is why most seances are held in the dark

Above right: the Australian medium George Spriggs. One of his materialisations wrote a letter – and went to the post office to buy a stamp for it

The apeman cometh

Not all of Franek Kluski's materialisations would have been welcome at a party. In July 1919 an apeman made the first of several appearances at a Kluski seance. Dr Gustave Geley reported: 'This being, which we have termed *Pithecanthropus*, has shown itself several times at our seances. One of us... felt its large shaggy head press hard on his shoulder and against his cheek. The head was covered with thick, coarse hair. A smell came from it like that of a deer or wet dog.'

And Colonel Norbert Ocholowicz,

who published a book about Kluski's mediumship in Polish, in 1926, wrote: 'This ape was of such great strength that it could easily move a heavy bookcase filled with books through the room, carry a sofa over the heads of the sitters, or lift the heaviest persons with their chairs into the air to the height of a tall person. Though the ape's behaviour sometimes caused fear, and indicated a low level of intelligence, it was never malignant. Indeed, it often expressed goodwill, gentleness and readiness to obey....'



out 'bloodless' surgery on patients. This account, written by Group Captain G.S.M. Insall, VC, is taken from a book about Isa Northage's mediumship, *A path prepared*, compiled and published by Allan Macdonald:

We prepared the room, donned white overalls and masks, as was the rule with Dr Reynolds. This was not new to me as I had been a student in the most up-to-date French hospital before the First World War changed my career to flying. . . . The two patients came in. [Both had hernias.] The first, the one with complications, was partially stripped and placed on the operating table. The other was given a chair nearby.

There was a trolley, and I checked over the instruments – tweezers, swabs, kidney basins and bowls; no cutting instruments at all except scissors to cut lint. There was also a small white pencil light. I checked the emergency door and saw that it was locked and bolted on the inside, and draught excluded by a mat placed on the threshold. I was just closing the inner door leading into the church when somebody noticed that the medium had not arrived. I opened it again, and she came in. The light was turned low and somebody opened in prayer. I could see the medium sitting in her usual chair, a curtain hanging on either side.

Immediately the prayer was over a trumpet rose and Dr Reynolds' familiar voice greeted us all. He then reassured the patients and gave them instructions. . . . I was assigned a kidney basin to collect swabs and stepped forward to the operating table.

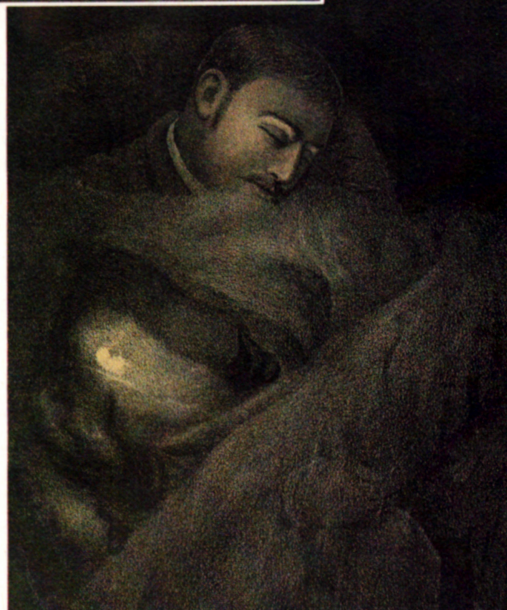
The trumpet went down, and almost immediately the doctor appeared in

materialised form on the opposite side of the operating table. He is of small stature. The medium was deep in trance.

He first took the tweezers and swab with a disinfecting cleaner and swabbed the area. The hernia was umbilical. I collected the swab in the kidney basin. Then I saw him place his hands on the patient's flesh, and they just went in deep, nearly out of sight. He stretched out for the tweezers and swabs and I collected eight soiled ones altogether.

The materialised doctor checked that the patient was comfortable – he had felt no pain – and turned the pencil light on his flesh to inspect the area. There was no sign of a wound or a scar. Dr Reynolds then said he wanted to give the medium a rest before the next operation – and he dematerialised.

Above left: Charles Richet, French scientist and psychical researcher who was president of the SPR in 1905. He was impressed with the mediumship of Kluski, finding no natural, or fraudulent, explanation for his phenomena



Above, left and below: three stages of materialisation, based on the experiences of William Eglinton. The mist that seems to grow up from the medium's solar plexus forms a distinct shape – sometimes an object (as in the case of 'apports'), or an animal or human being. But it always disintegrates



Further reading

W.J. Crawford, *The reality of psychic phenomena*, J.M. Watkins 1916
 Fred Gettings, *Ghosts in photographs*, Harmony (New York) 1978
 Harry Price, *Stella C.*, Longman 1925

The doctor's dilemma

Every unorthodox method of healing has its devoted advocates – and its grateful clients, convinced of its effectiveness. RUTH WEST begins a survey of the treatments that are offered as rivals or as complements to 'scientific' medicine

FRINGE MEDICINE, alternative medicine, natural medicine, complementary medicine – all these are titles that have been applied to a body of therapies practised, in the main, outside the bounds of orthodox medicine by practitioners with no qualifications that a conventional doctor would recognise. The terms include a whole range of practices. Osteopathy is concerned with correcting relationships among the different parts of the body's mechanical structure – the skeleton and musculature – by manipulation and other techniques. Naturopathy rejects the use of drugs and relies on the body's own healing systems, aided by 'natural' agencies – 'healthy' foods, exercise, a moderate regimen. Acupuncture and the associated system of massage, acupressure, are now well-known in the West and have attracted the serious interest of the medical profession (see page 181). Reflexology is a system of healing concerned with the supposed beneficial effects on internal organs of massage applied to the hands and feet. Hypnosis, yoga, meditation, the latest diet – all these, too, can lie on the borderland between conventional and alternative medicine.

There is one thing, however, that these practices have in common. To orthodoxy they are unscientific. They do not fit within the current medical scientific framework explaining the way in which the body works. And they have little or no research behind them to back up their claims to be legitimate, effective treatments. Yet while science awaits satisfactory evidence, the number of satisfied customers of these therapies grows – customers who have often gone as a last resort when all else has failed. Several surveys, some of them commissioned by governments, point to this growth in both the number of practitioners of alternative medicine and the number of their patients, and a concurrent dissatisfaction with orthodox medical care. For example, a survey conducted by the British consumer magazine *Which?* in 1981 found that nine out of ten of the people questioned who had used alternative medicine said that they would use it again. Two thirds of those who had used alternative medicine during the preceding five years said that they had found that orthodox medicine did not help them, or

they did not like what it had to offer.

Perhaps the features that attract such warm praise are as much to do with the general attitudes that are common to alternative therapies as with the nature of their specific remedies. The relationships between therapists and their patients are often closer than those between conventional doctors and their patients. Furthermore, fringe therapies generally address themselves to the 'whole person' – to emotions, attitudes and all aspects of daily living: diet, exercise, even relationships with others. Conventional medicine, on the other hand, has achieved its greatest successes in tackling isolated disorders of the body, caused by single, identifiable agents, such as a particular virus or a particular chemical imbalance. The professional worker in conventional medicine prides himself on a 'detached' attitude, and never presumes to guide the patient's general way of life.

That something is fashionable or popular in no way guarantees its truth. So the charge is made that the gullible public, disappointed to find that medicine cannot supply a wonder drug for each disorder that afflicts us, is seeking magical cures elsewhere: and in the course of this irrational and prescientific behaviour people are being duped by charlatans and quacks.

The wisdom of the shaman

Many workers in alternative medicine would claim, on the other hand, that they are extending the range of techniques and drugs in use – adding to the armoury of the medical practitioner. They also claim to be recovering some of the wisdom and some of the healing arts that have been lost with the advent of modern medicine. Certainly the skill of the healer may have been viewed magically in the past: the sick person may have gone to a priest, shaman or medicine man – a person possessing jealously guarded esoteric knowledge – expecting him to be able to manipulate nature on his behalf. Many people, even in advanced societies, may still expect and want that from their doctors. But we are free to learn from the traditional healer while rejecting the magical attitude – to ask just how the shaman or priest contributed to the recovery of the sick.

Healing was a priestly function when Western medicine first developed, in the tradition of the Greek god Asclepius (whom the Romans called Aesculapius). According to René Dubos, a distinguished student of medicine and its history, this tradition had three strands. First there was the cult of Asclepius, which was

under the control of a priesthood which practised faith healing based on

Below: a page from *The book of herbs* of the German botanist Adam Lonitzer. Published in 1557, it was an early example of a new kind of herbal, which described and depicted plants in a scientific spirit. European herbals had hitherto contained mythological and fantastic accounts of plants, with pictures copied from Greek and Roman originals





Left: 'natural' healing for the rich in 1898. At this luxurious sanatorium near Dresden, in Germany, well-to-do patients could relax, sunbathe, take the air and the local mineral waters, and live on wholesome food

Below: herbal medicine for the poor. Dr Bokanky, the street herbalist, was one of the traders depicted in Henry Mayhew's great work *London labour and the London poor*, which appeared in 1851. He described the virtues of his 'Kalibonca root' in these words: 'It'll cure the toothache, head-ache, giddiness in the head, dimness of sight, rheumatics in the head, and is highly recommended for the ague; never known to fail . . .'

Erste
ys mas, unlg
Dänlin.



blüt im leib. Werzerbrochen wer im
Gamander mit Honig gestossen/auff
e/es heyle vnd seubert wol. Den safft
machte sie klar. Dis kraut in wein geföt
giffte/der frawen blödigkete/ vñ weis-
loß. Dis kraut vñ Nigella, jedes gleich
ein säcklin gethon / vnd warm auff
geleget/zertheyle die stüß/ vñ wehret
schnupffen. Gamander gestossen/ vnd
imperiert mit baumöl/ vñ den leib dar-
gesalbe/vertreibt den bösen frost/ vnd
güte hig. Hat auch fast die art den
innen Bethonien an jm.

Groß Bachengel.

Cap. xv.

Rosß Bachengel wirt vñ den Grie-
chischen vñ Latinischen Teucridon
genant.
sein gestalt ist dem Gamanderlin nit
vngleich / daher es von etlichen auch
mædrys genant wirt/ Seine bletter
hart/beinabe wie der Zifererbsen/ bin
in blawes blümlin/wie das Gaman-
derlin/

dreams. Drawn by a widespread and deep belief in the healing power of the god, many patients came to seek cures in sanctuaries dedicated to his worship but not organised for true medical care. . . . Purifying baths, anointments, abstinence, a religious atmosphere, and the interpretation of dreams took the place of medical treatment.

The other two strands of the tradition were purely medical practices, represented by two goddesses: Hygeia (Health) and Panacea (All Heal, or Cure All). They were practised by lay physicians, whose medicine was based on the anatomical and physiological knowledge of their times. Hygeia represented the prevention of disease: live wisely and you will stay healthy. Panacea 'symbolised the belief that ailments can be cured by skilful use of the proper kinds of substances'. Only these last two aspects gave rise, through the great physicians of Greece, Hippocrates, Aristotle and Galen, to modern medicine.

But one further crucial step towards our present-day outlook was made with the rise of modern science: mind was divorced from matter, and health came to be viewed as the quality of performance of the body-machine. Medicine became a matter of making sure, with the use of drugs and surgery, that the parts of the machine were kept in good repair.

Today conventional medicine attacks its unorthodox rivals on two main grounds, as we have seen: that they are reviving magical attitudes towards the practice of medicine, and that they are foisting spurious techniques and ineffective medicines on a gullible public. To examine these questions we shall

discuss two important types of alternative therapy (although this is by no means an all-inclusive classification): first, therapies based upon the taking of medicines; secondly, therapies based upon the use of touch or manipulation.

An important branch of the unorthodox therapies based on medicines is herbalism. This, it may be argued, is well on the way to scientific respectability. After all, until the 1930s, medicines came almost wholly from plants and fungi, and many still do. Morphine, digitalis, ephedrine, quinine, senna are a few of these. Nonetheless, our present scientific attitudes stand in the way of a full





Medical treatment is administered by Asclepius, god of healing, in a Greek relief of the fourth century BC (above). From being merely a wise, but mortal, physician, mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad*, he rose in stature and came to be regarded as the son of the god Apollo and a nymph, Coronis. He was supposed to have been taught the art of healing by the centaur Chiron. He learned so well that

A temple of healing



Zeus finally slew him, afraid that his skill would make mankind immortal. His cult extended over the entire Mediterranean world and his temples were places of worship and of healing. The sick would come there, offer up a sacrifice and spend a night in the temple. They would receive advice from priests and then depart. Numerous commemorative tablets survive, relating the names, sicknesses and, invariably, the cures of the patients.

The greatest of the temples devoted to Asclepius was that at Epidaurus, in the Peloponnese. In 293 BC Rome was beset by a plague, and a mission was sent to Epidaurus to bring back the image of Asclepius. It brought instead a snake that was supposed to be inhabited by the god, and a temple to Asclepius was built in Rome.

Contact with a sacred serpent played an important part in the treatment of the sick at the temples of Asclepius. The serpent often appears in representations of the god, and is seen in this statue (left) of Hygieia, one of the daughters of Asclepius. The small figure at her feet is Eros Hypnos, representing sleep, one of the other important factors in Asclepian healing. Today twin serpents of Asclepius, coiled round a staff, are still used as a medical symbol.

understanding and acceptance of herbal medicine.

The standard, safe approach to the use of herbal preparations is to spend massive research grants, using very expensive and sophisticated equipment, to analyse each plant for its active compounds. If such a substance has a chemical structure similar to one that is known and understood, then it may be of use. Herbal mixtures in seemingly illogical combinations are to be avoided at all costs and, as one commentator says, they may be 'even more insidiously dangerous when they contain ingredients of non-herbal origin'.

Even if a herbal remedy that seemed to be a likely candidate for medical use were to be prepared according to the criteria of modern pharmacology, it would be required to pass lengthy and expensive tests of its efficacy – on laboratory animals, on small groups of patients and finally in large-scale clinical trials. Scientific critics doubt that the herbal practitioners of the past would have been able to recognise some of the subtle ways in which drugs can be dangerous – in causing cancers or genetic mutations over long periods of use, for example.

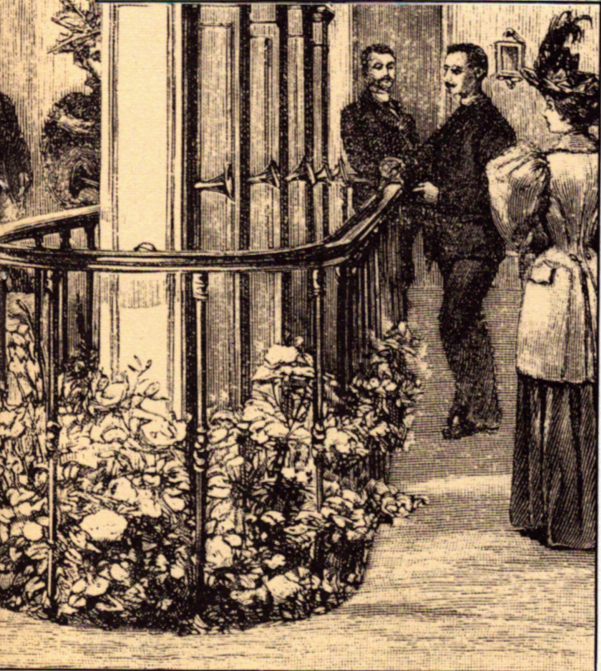
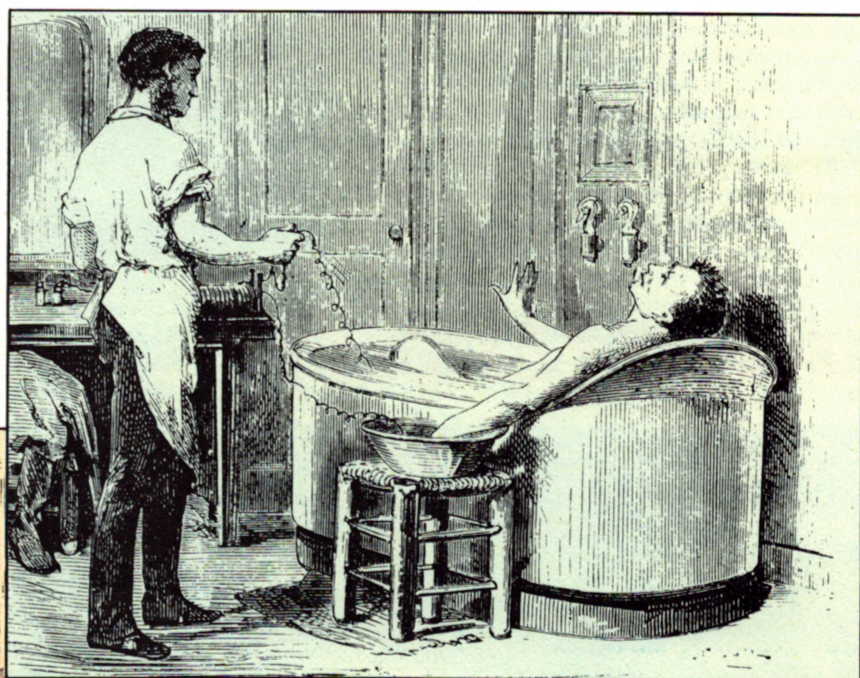
This approach dismisses the knowledge of those using herbs as failing to meet modern scientific standards. Yet medical herbalists are often aware of the side effects of particular preparations and will employ other



ones to counteract them. And it is possible that modern science does not yet know how to analyse fully the action of plants. There are certain enzymes – substances that promote and regulate important chemical reactions in living organisms – that, as one writer says, 'we know little about and cannot isolate, but which seem to do good work'. There is evidence that there can be a difference in action between a whole-plant preparation and that of the isolated substance that is allegedly the active ingredient. It is often better to use the whole plant: trials have shown that the heart drug digitalis, prepared from the whole leaf of the foxglove, is superior to the purified substance extracted from the leaves and often used medically.

A stumbling block to the acceptance of herbal medicine is the sheer variety of ills

Below: the electric bath of 1874. The patient received electric shocks, intended to be therapeutic, through the bathwater. He could break the circuit when he wished by lifting his hand from the bowl



that each is claimed to help. Medical workers are deeply imbued with the traditional notion that each cure must be tailored to one disorder. But two such 'panaceas' have raised some interest in the scientific community. One is a group of herbs described as 'valuable nutrients': it includes wheat grass and the evening primrose. The other is a group of herbs called adaptogens, which act as tonics: they include ginseng and Russian root.

The oil of the evening primrose is supposed to aid sufferers from high blood pressure, excess weight, eczema, rheumatoid arthritis, multiple sclerosis, alcoholism, premenstrual tension – the list is seemingly endless. But it does seem to have a scientific basis for its claims. It is a source of gamma-linolenic acid, which is of vital importance in the chain of body processes leading to the production of prostaglandins, which in turn are of key importance for the smooth working of the body – including, notably, the control of blood pressure. At present, however, the case is undecided: more extensive trials are needed before the biochemical significance of the oil can be properly judged.

A final area of research must be mentioned. From the orthodox viewpoint, talk of the correct times for planting and collecting herbs, according to time of day, season and phase of the Moon, smacks of magic. Yet the evidence is there: some plants can be highly toxic at certain times of year, yet safe at others. The intake of oxygen by plants varies with the phase of the Moon – so why should medical effectiveness not similarly vary? It seems that the folklore regarding the times of planting and collection are not there merely for the purpose of persuading patients that some ritual is being performed to aid their cure.

One of the oldest unorthodox therapies, homoeopathy, is discussed on page 1866

Left: the vibrating helmet, a treatment for Parkinson's disease invented by the great French neurologist Jean Martin Charcot. In the late 19th century orthodox and alternative medicine could still hardly be distinguished: bizarre treatments such as this typified 'official' medicine

Centre: inhaling ozone at a French clinic in 1895. The amount of gas used would probably have been too small to produce ozone's normal effect: irritation of the nose and throat

Far left: evening primrose, regarded as a remedy for a wide range of ills

Long after the much-publicised disappearance of Franck Fontaine from Cergy-Pontoise, confusion still reigns over whether he was abducted by a UFO. Was it all a put-up job by him and his two friends? Or did it really happen? HILARY EVANS sums up

THE ABDUCTION OF Franck Fontaine by a UFO, though unsubstantiated by scientific evidence, seemed a plausible story on first hearing. Had he and his friends Jean-Pierre Prévost and Salomon N'Diaye been content to tell that story and nothing else, they might have convinced an interested world of its truth. But the two books on the case – one by the well-known science fiction writer Jimmy Guieu and one by Prévost himself – raised questions that cast suspicion on the entire affair. Moreover, there were many interviews and conferences in which widely divergent material was put forward. And Prévost, who had pre-empted Fontaine as the hero of the Cergy-Pontoise UFO affair, even published a short-lived journal in which he kept the public informed of his continuing dialogue with the 'intelligences from beyond' who

he claimed had contacted him.

All this increased the doubts of the sceptics. Michel Piccin and his colleagues of the Control organisation had detected inconsistencies and contradictions in the witnesses' statements from the start. And the more they probed, the more discrepancies they found.

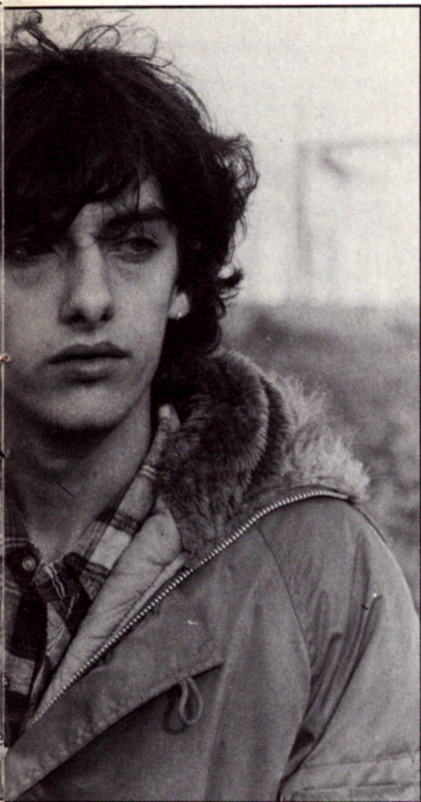
It began with trivial, marginal matters, like Prévost's insistence that before the encounter he had no interest in or knowledge of UFOs. The Control investigators found that his brother was a French representative of the American UFO organisation APRO. Even if Prévost did not share his brother's interest in UFOs, he could hardly have been unaware of them. Besides, in his own book, Prévost had said that he saw several spacecraft similar to ones he had 'seen as a child' when the 'intelligences' took him to their UFO base. He also denied seeing a magazine in which a UFO abduction story, very like Fontaine's, was being serialised. Yet Control established that this very magazine was in Prévost's flat at the time of the Cergy-Pontoise abduction.

The events of the night before the abduction became more confused the more they were investigated. Control discovered that there were five people – not three – in



Fact, fraud or fantasy?





Above: Franck Fontaine, whose disappearance for a week – allegedly as an abductee of aliens – stirred worldwide interest. He was never very forthcoming about what had happened to him

Left: the cabbage field in which Fontaine awoke on his return to Cergy-Pontoise

Prévost's flat that night. Why had the published accounts almost completely failed to mention the presence of Corinne, Prévost's girlfriend, and Fabrice Joly? One reason suggested itself: knowledge of the presence of the fourth young man, Joly, might throw doubt on one of the facts most favourable to Prévost and N'Diaye. They had claimed that they had gone straight to the police when Fontaine vanished from their car, even though they knew they might get into trouble because they were driving without a licence. But Joly was there because he had a valid licence and had agreed to drive the three friends to the market at Gisors.

Discrepancies abound

Why were Corinne and Joly never questioned about what happened? Did they see and hear nothing? They could certainly have straightened out some of the contradictions, for Fontaine, Prévost and N'Diaye could not even agree on who had been at the flat on the night before the abduction – surely one of the most memorable of their lives. First the three had said they spent the night together. Then Prévost recollected that he had watched a television film with friends elsewhere.

Other discrepancies force us to ask how far we can trust their account. They said that they were dubious about their car's ability to start and pushed it to get the motor running, then left Fontaine in the car to make sure it didn't stop. Why didn't Joly, the only licensed driver, do this so that Fontaine could lend a hand with loading the jeans for the market? Did they really sit outside the block of flats at 4 a.m. with the motor running without any complaint from the neighbours? None of the other residents seem even to have heard the sound. What about N'Diaye's completely opposing statement that they

loaded the car first and only then started the motor? Whom should we believe?

The account of the one neighbour who did witness anything only makes matters more confused. Returning home at the time the young men were supposedly loading the car, he said he saw two people get into the Taunus estate car and drive away. Yet the three involved said that Fontaine was alone when he drove up onto the road to get a better view of the UFO they had spotted.

Even though UFOs are notoriously difficult to describe, the three accounts of the one at Cergy-Pontoise are particularly far apart. One saw 'a huge beam', another 'a ball', the third 'a flash'. One said it was moving fairly slowly, taking two minutes to cross the sky; the others said it was moving fast, gone in a matter of seconds. There was further disagreement about the direction in which it was moving.

The circumstances of Fontaine's return a week after his supposed abduction are no less confused as several stories emerged. One of the journalists covering the case was Iris Billon-Duplan, who worked for a local newspaper and lived close by. Apart from the special interest of a case that had occurred almost on her doorstep, the fact that she lived nearby meant she could follow it personally. As a result, she became closely involved with the witnesses. Indeed, she spent the night before Fontaine's return with Prévost, preparing a definitive account of the case.

According to the journalist's published account, N'Diaye went off to bed shortly after midnight, leaving her with Prévost. He told her that he had no food or money because his involvement in the UFO affair was keeping him from working. So she suggested that they go to her flat where she could give him a meal while they continued to work on

Space briefing



Franck Fontaine remembered things that had happened to him during his week 'out of this world' only slowly and bit by bit, but refused to undergo hypnosis to speed the process. However, strange – and sometimes very disturbing – dreams helped him to recall his experiences, he said.

In one instance that he recalled, he was in a large white room with machines that went all round the walls. They were all the same height and had opaque white glass fronts that lit up and went out almost simultaneously. He was lying on a sort of couch and two small luminous spheres – the extra-terrestrials – were talking to him about problems on Earth and how to solve them.

His abductors, who were always kind, told him that he would be the sole judge of what to reveal of his adventure. He seems to have decided to say as little as possible.



the article. This explains why Fontaine did not find Prévost in when he returned and went to Prévost's flat. We know that Fontaine then went to N'Diaye's flat and succeeded in rousing him. But according to the journalist's account, N'Diaye then left Fontaine and hurried round to her flat to tell her and Prévost the news.

Should we believe Iris Billon-Duplan or Salomon N'Diaye? For his statement, made to the police, flatly contradicts hers.

His story was that he happened to wake up at about 4.30 a.m., looked out of his window and saw a ball of light on the main road. When he saw a silhouetted figure emerge from it, he recognised his friend Franck Fontaine. He then hurried to a telephone to report the return to Radio Luxembourg, believing he would get a reward for information about Fontaine's whereabouts. (In this he was mistaken; it was Europe Numéro 1 that had offered a reward.)

Radio Luxembourg later confirmed that such a call had been made, but not at 4.30 a.m. because there was nobody on duty at that hour. The implication is that N'Diaye telephoned later than 4.30 a.m. and that he waited to inform the police until he had attempted to claim the reward money – not saying much for his concern about his friend. In the event, it was Radio Luxembourg staff who told the police that Franck Fontaine had returned. According to them, they had received an *anonymous* call from a man who, just as he was going to work, saw Fontaine coming back. Surely N'Diaye would not have made an anonymous call if he wanted to collect the reward.

These contradictions are just a sample

from Control's 50-page report. There is confusion, if not outright deception, at every stage of the affair. Some of the discrepancies can be attributed to faulty memory, but such an explanation can hardly be stretched to account for Prévost's extraordinary visit to the tunnel. As a case history, Cergy-Pontoise is so ambiguous that few will be ready to give it serious credence. Yet it caused such a sensation that it is still worth asking what really happened. If the abduction was not genuine, was it a put-up job from the outset? Or did the witnesses gradually distort what was fundamentally a true UFO experience? If so, at what point did deceit and contrivance begin? There are several ways to answer these questions.

An elaborate tale

We may believe that Franck Fontaine was abducted as claimed, that all the witnesses were doing their best to tell the truth and that contradictions crept in because of defective memory. However, the extent of the discrepancies makes it easier to believe that the trio elaborated the story for their own purposes, adding sensational details that they may or may not have believed actually happened.

Alternatively, we may surmise that Franck Fontaine was not in fact abducted, but that he sincerely believed he was. He may have been in, or put into, some altered state of consciousness in which he experienced the illusion of the abduction. That this can happen is an established psychological phenomenon, so we cannot rule it out altogether. But it does raise questions about Fontaine's two friends. If he was deluded,



Top: Jean-Pierre Prévost with Patrick Pottier of the Control group. Control carried out as thorough an investigation as they could without the active co-operation of Prévost and the other two involved

Above: Saloman N'Diaye in front of the Taunus estate car which, he said, he and Prévost saw enveloped by a UFO just before their friend Fontaine disappeared

Further reading

Jimmy Guieu, with Franck Fontaine, Salomon N'Diaye, Jean-Pierre Prévost, *Contacts OVNI Cergy-Pontoise*, Editions du Rocher (Monaco) 1980
 Jean-Pierre Prévost, *OVNI, le grand contact: la vérité sur l'affaire de Cergy-Pontoise*, Michel Moutet (Regusse, France) 1980

where do they stand? Were they also in an altered state of consciousness, experiencing or being made to believe in the same illusion? And does this explain the contradictions? If so, who fed them the illusion and made them believe in its reality?

While neither of these explanations can be ruled out entirely, we may consider it most plausible that the whole affair was a fabrication from the start – that there never was any abduction and that the three young men put the story together for fun, for gain or for some undiscovered ideological motive. We know that the trio immediately co-operated with Jimmy Guieu in a commercial enterprise. We learn from Control that Prévost, clearly the dominant one of the three, was noted for practical joking at school. Indeed he told the Control investigators, 'You bet I'm a clown!'

More questions than answers

The reports are consistent with the hypothesis that Prévost persuaded his two companions to stage a hoax, but that Corinne and Fabrice Joly refused to go along. Perhaps none of them expected their story to attract so much attention and they were forced to improvise beyond their prepared narrative. This could explain such muddles as the contradictory accounts of Fontaine's return.

Another question then arises: was Guieu a party to the deception? Did he suspect the story from the start but, as a professional writer, recognise its money-making potential? Did he start by believing them, as he claimed to do, then discover the hoax but decide to go along with it – perhaps because he was already committed? Or did he believe that the affair was genuine? The last supposition seems unlikely in the light of Guieu's long involvement with ufology, unless he was unusually gullible. On the

other hand, it is hard to believe that he would risk his reputation by endorsing a case that he knew to be a fake. We are probably left with the surmise that he discovered a hoax but decided not to reveal it for reasons of his own.

If the Cergy-Pontoise contact was indeed all a hoax, it would explain why the trio committed themselves to the uncritical Guieu and his *Institut Mondial des Sciences Avancées* (World Institute of Advanced Sciences). IMSA has little following or reputation, but Guieu offered the backing of a big name, sympathetic support and the chance to make a substantial profit from a book bearing his name. And other UFO organisations might have uncovered the deceit in a short time, if deceit it was.

In the absence of any definite proof, all this is merely speculative. Will the truth ever be established? There are hopes that it may be. During their researches, Control came across a tantalising clue that they were unable to follow up. It seems that during Fontaine's disappearance, a school in Cergy-Pontoise was working on a project about it with the local newspaper – the one that was later to carry Iris Billon-Duplan's version of Fontaine's return. Some of the children learned that one of the school workers was an aunt of Fontaine and interviewed her as part of their project in the presence of one of the teachers and one of Iris Billon-Duplan's colleagues from the paper. During the interview, Fontaine's aunt said angrily that she knew perfectly well where her nephew was. He was, she said, staying with a friend.

Was she stating a fact or simply saying what she thought to be true? Who was the friend and where did he or she live? The answers to these questions could settle the Cergy-Pontoise mystery. But until we learn if someone knew where Fontaine was all the time, the case must remain open.



Right: a UFO base in a disused railway tunnel, as described by Jean-Pierre Prévost in his book on the Cergy-Pontoise affair. The tunnel also contained an abandoned Nazi train carriage left over from the Second World War. Prévost, always the dominant member of the trio of witnesses, quickly became the 'star of the show' and the other two receded into the background – for, said Prévost, the aliens had simply used Fontaine to establish contact with himself



Riddle of Racetrack Playa

The stones move – and no one sees them do it. Yet thousands have seen their tracks in the dry lake beds that dot the Sierra Nevada mountains in the western United States. BOB RICKARD tells how the moving stones make their mysterious journeys

HIGH IN THE Sierra Nevada mountains, in the remote region of California's border with Nevada, there are places where stones move at night. Once, a band of pioneers was trapped in these rough, deeply channelled hills and unexpected dried-up lake beds, on their way to prospect or to settle in more hospitable places. Now it is part of the vast Death Valley National Park, of which the moving stones are a great attraction.

Perhaps the most famous of these dry lake beds, or playas, is Racetrack Playa, about 14 miles (2 kilometres) wide by 3 miles (5 kilometres) long and nearly 4000 feet (1200 metres) above sea level. The visitor's eye is immediately drawn to the scattered boulders and stones that litter this plain of hard, cracked mud. The quality of light at this altitude adds to the surreal effect, so that the rocks, with their snaking furrows behind them, give the impression of being both stationary and stirring. No one has ever seen the stones move – but move they do.

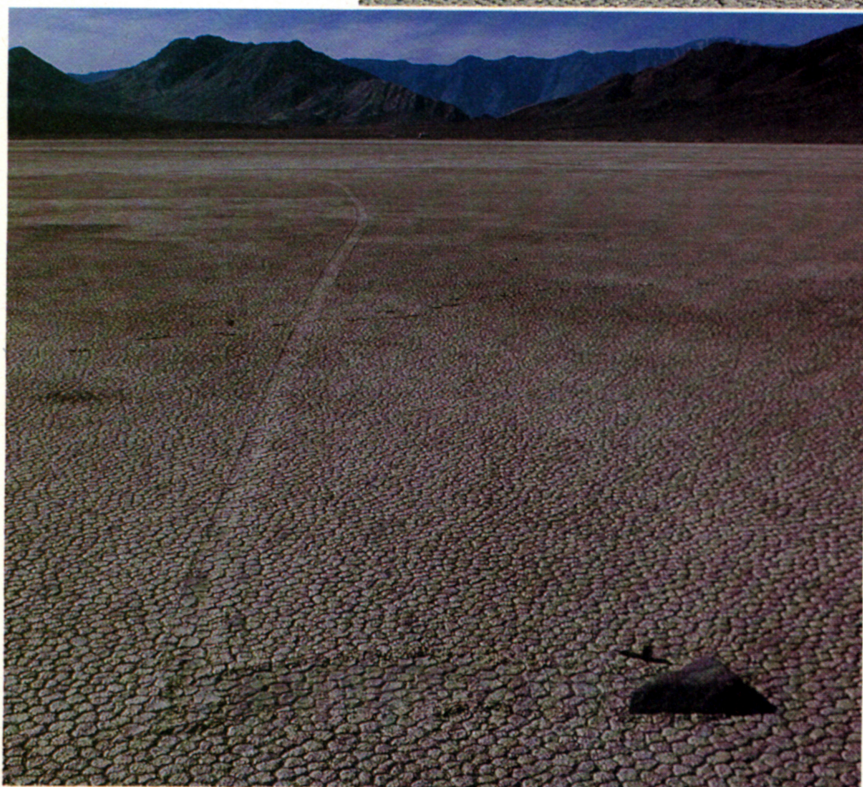
Over the years it was noticed that the rocks that moved had not rolled along but were pushed, leaving a groove the same size as their width behind them. Then in 1955 a geologist called George M. Stanley wrote in the *Bulletin* of the Geological Society of America (GSA) that he believed wind and ice were involved. Stanley was intrigued by the fact that groups of rocks often moved together. He suggested that sheets of ice formed around a group of rocks and that the wind raised the whole sheet slightly and propelled it along. This sounds plausible and was accepted for many years, especially after ice sheets embedded with rocks had been seen moving on other Californian playas. However, the ice layers on the Death Valley playas are extremely thin, and while they may be capable of moving smaller stones, even Stanley did not suggest they could shift the 300- to 600-pound (135- to 270-kilogram) boulders that had made tracks.

The mystery of Racetrack Playa became world-famous in the 1960s, and in 1969 it attracted the attention of Dr Robert P. Sharp, of the California Institute of Technology's geology department, who began a study of the moving stones that lasted seven years. He selected 25 stones of a variety of shapes and weights, up to about 1000 pounds (455 kilograms), named them, and used a metal stake to mark their position. Later he included five more rocks. When he was able to make the arduous journey to the playa over more than 30 miles (50 kilometres)



Opposite: the trail of a moving stone is marked by clear tracks behind it in the arid landscape of Racetrack Playa – one of the dried-up lakes of the Sierra Nevada mountains. The moving stones are a tourist attraction of the Death Valley National Park

These two sets of tracks show how far some of the moving stones travel (right) and how they can change direction (below)



the rock by its movement. This indicated that the rocks must have moved when the playa surface was soft, not during its hard-baked or frozen state. Sharp found that most of the recorded movements occurred in three periods: the particularly wet or stormy winters of 1968 to 1969, 1972 to 1973 and 1973 to 1974. Although only some of the stones moved during all three periods, Sharp could infer that rain was as important a factor as wind. The playas get very little rain – about 0 to 3 inches (0 to 8 centimetres) annually – but they are surrounded by about 70 square miles (180 square kilometres) of hills, which make a fine catchment area. Even a light rain in the area could result in a thin layer of water over most of the playa.

of rough dirt road, he looked for any tagged rocks that had moved, staked their new position and measured the distance travelled.

During the seven-year study period, 28 of the 30 rocks moved. The longest track measured 860 feet (262 metres) but, as in all cases, this distance was reached by a number of smaller moves rather than all at once. The longest single movement was 659 feet (201 metres) by a 9-ounce (250-gram) cobble called Nancy. The direction of these movements was north-north-easterly, with a few deviations to the east and south-east, which matched the direction of the prevailing winds in the playa.

Sharp soon noticed that there was a ridge on the edges of the furrow and that a small heap of debris was pushed up at the front of

Because the surface of the playa is made of fine clay, the action of the rain creates a sheet of water with clay particles in suspension. If the water soaks the surface deeply enough or for long enough, the rocks get bogged down in soft, sticky clay. But when about a quarter of an inch (0.6 centimetres) of water collects, the surface is firm enough to support the rocks. 'The secret,' Sharp wrote in the *GSA Bulletin* in 1976, 'is to catch the play of wind and water at precisely the right moment.' He thinks that movement probably occurs within one to three days of wet or stormy weather when the surface is 'as slick as a whistle'. A powerful gust of wind is all that is needed to make the rock slide, and a slighter wind afterwards will keep it going. Sharp maintains that the surrounding hills scoop



and channel the winds into the playa at sufficient speeds to start the rocks moving – and the smoother the bottom of a stone, the farther it will skid. He has also calculated the maximum velocity of a moving stone as about 3 feet (1 metre) per second.

The phenomenon of moving rocks is not unique to Racetrack Playa. Tracks have been observed on at least 10 other playas in California and Nevada, and from time to time, in the literature of geology, similar anomalies have been reported. In an article written in 1879 for the periodical *Nineteenth Century*, Lord Dunraven told of a strange sight on the shore of a lake in Nova Scotia the previous year:

One day my Indian told me that in a lake close by all the rocks were moving out of the water, a circumstance I thought not a little strange. However, I went to look at the unheard of spectacle and, sure enough, there were the rocks apparently all moving out of the water on to dry land. The lake is of considerable extent, but shallow and full of great masses of rock. Many of these masses appear to have travelled right out of the lake and are now high and dry some 15 yards [14 metres] above the margin of the water. You may see them of all sizes, from blocks of, say, 6 or 8 feet [1.8 or 2.4 metres] in diameter, down to stones which a man could lift. Moreover, you find them in various stages of progress, some 100 yards [90 metres] or more from the shore and apparently just beginning to move; others halfway to their destination; and others again. . . high and dry above the water. In all cases there is a distinct groove or furrow, which the rock has clearly plowed for itself.

One of the 'walled lakes' in the state of Iowa, USA. According to Professor Charles A. White in a *Scientific American* article (1884), these walls were formed by deposits of compacted gravel, earth and boulders through the action of ice expansion in the shallow lakes. An early theory about the moving stones of the playas maintained that ice formation had caused their movement

Lord Dunraven noticed one enormous specimen some distance from the water's edge; earth and stones were heaped up in front of it to over 3 feet (1 metre) in height. A furrow the exact width of the rock extended down the shore and into the water until it was lost from sight in the depths.

This weird scene, remarkably similar to that on the playas, was explained in a letter to the *Scientific American* later in 1879. The writer, who signed the letter 'J.W.A.', claimed to have seen identical effects in other Canadian lakes. The effect is most prominent in shallow lakes that are partly bounded by steep banks or cliffs, according to the explanation. As ice forms it expands and pushes outwards in all directions. The cliffs form an immovable obstacle on one shore, however, doubling the thrust on the opposite, open shore. In shallow water the ice extends to the lake bottom and embeds the rocks there. As the ice expands, it takes the rocks and any other debris with it, depositing them farther along when expansion stops and a thaw sets in. As the lake ice expands and melts each winter, cumulative movements would be enough to drive the rocks onto the land. A similar explanation was proposed by Professor Charles A. White (*Scientific American* 1884) to account for the mystery of the so-called 'walled lakes' of Iowa, which were originally thought to be 'the work of an extinct race'. He said that successive expansions of ice in shallow prairie lakes gradually deposited substantial ridges of compacted earth, gravel and boulders around the perimeter of the lakes.

So we may know how the rocks move. But the surrealistic scene of playas, rocks and their snaking track marks can still awaken a keen appreciation of the wonder and mystery of the natural world.

Further reading

Jim Brandon, *Weird America*, E.P. Dutton (New York) 1978

John Michell and Robert J. M. Rickard, *Phenomena, a book of wonders*, Thames and Hudson 1977

Post script

Your letters to
THE UNEXPLAINED

Dear Sir,

When I was 24 years old, or thereabouts, I had a very strange experience that I should like to share.

At that time I was living a fairly wild and riotous life, and doing a great deal of shift work. This meant sleeping at odd times. One day I went to bed at mid morning and, as usual, soon fell asleep. I was woken, lying on my left side, in a room filled with bright light. This was not coming from any one point, as far as I could see, but seemed to be everywhere. The objects in the room cast no shadows. I could see a wall on my left, and as I studied it I realised that the room was no longer the same as the one in which I had fallen asleep.

I could barely move, and could not control my body as I wished. Only with the greatest of difficulty was I able to turn round until I was lying on my back, and slowly swivel my head round to face forwards. Lying on my back, my hands folded over my chest, I became aware of two figures standing looking at me. I tried to raise my head, but the paralysis remained. As far as I am aware, I did not speak, and neither did my two visitors. One was a young man, probably around 30 years old, and the other was older, with a shock of white hair. Both were dressed in light-coloured robes or tunics, and appeared to be normal human beings – except for the older one, whose cheeks were unlike ours in texture; the only way I can describe them is by likening them to cotton wool or to the clouds in the sky. I gazed at them in some wonderment, feeling no terror, until their eyes suddenly turned red, and with horror I found that they were able to read my innermost thoughts and memories of the past. I realised that I was searingly ashamed of what they were seeing, and managed to tear my eyes away from theirs. I cannot explain this – I can only repeat that the feeling of being ashamed of my past was overpowering in their presence.

I had to get away from them, so with great difficulty I turned my face towards the wall – which appeared to be metallic – and, with every fibre of my body, willed my visitors to go away. I did not utter any words, but asked them to go with my mind. Immediately they departed, and I awoke in my own room, sweating profusely.

I have never been able to explain this experience – I put it down to a nightmare, and have never related it to anyone until very recently. At the time I had no particular secret to be ashamed of, despite my dissolute existence – and I might add that I continued my way of life for some years afterwards without any repetition of the experience.

Yours faithfully,

Ian Macleod

Torrance, Strathclyde

Dear Sir,

I have been buying *The Unexplained* every week and should like to say how much I enjoy collecting it. I also think Postscript is a good idea – it gives everyone a chance to share their experiences. I think everyone has some strange event in their life that they can't explain.

I myself had a disturbing experience one night in July 1979. I went to bed around 11.30 p.m. one Wednesday. I lay for about an hour with my eyes

open, not feeling at all tired, and finally closed my eyes around 12.30 a.m. All of a sudden I felt a very bright light shining on me. I immediately opened my eyes, and found myself lying on the floor of an unfamiliar room.

Lifting my head, I saw a very tall figure standing close to me, what looked like a man in a silver suit. I stared at this figure, feeling rather nervous. Then I realised we were communicating through our minds. The creature told me not to be afraid, and to follow him. I began to realise I was inside some kind of spaceship. The creature took me into the middle of the room, where there was a similar creature sitting at a dashboard, dressed all in gold, and holding what looked like a pair of handlebars protruding from the instrument panel. The dashboard had on it two circular dials, about 3 feet [1 metre] in diameter – but the strange thing is, they had no figures on them. They were changing colour from the middle outwards in a spiral form, the left-hand one moving clockwise, the right-hand anticlockwise, from cream to light yellow to deep yellow to light orange, light red, dark red, purple, and then dark blue. When the dials began to rotate I had a sensation like that of being in a lift, and I saw that the walls of the room, which was about 60 yards [55 metres] across, were made up of flickering lights of various colours.

The tall creature told me to follow him. We came to what looked to me like a black hole in the floor. He asked me to step on it – then, when I looked uncertain, he went first, telling me to follow him. We found ourselves on a lower floor on which frame structures were visible in the walls. These ribs looked like metal but felt like plastic; the creature told me that they were tougher than steel, but elastic, so any damage to the spacecraft from high-speed collisions could be easily repaired simply by pushing the structure back into place – the ribs would not crack.

Next we went back into the room with the instrument panel at the centre. This time the flashing lights were gone, and instead there were two observation windows through which I could see a dark, peaty-brown planet – a beautiful sight. The creature told me it was a living planet long ago, but now it had no life. The creature seemed distressed about this.

As we left the planet the windows faded and the flashing lights came back. I waited near the instrument panel watching the clocks change colour: this meant we were gathering speed. I felt the sensation of movement once more, just like being in a lift, but was never conscious of any engine noise. The craft was perfectly clean and fresh, and not noticeably either hot or cold. I seem to remember that the creatures told me why the craft glowed – it was due to the solar energy collected from the Sun.

The creature said goodbye, and told me that we would meet again. Then it was as if I blinked my eyes and I suddenly found myself back in bed. The strange thing is, when I looked at my watch I saw the time was 5.10 a.m. – which meant the dream had lasted over 4 hours. Surely no dream can last that long! I would be very interested to know if other readers have had similar experiences.

Yours faithfully,

G.A. Grimshaw

Manchester

THE WORLD'S MYSTERIOUS PLACES - 38
Lydian necropolis, Marmara Gölü, Turkey

